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Lee Valley Leisure, David Robinson
Generation Yacht, London 2005

Context Notes:

Lee Valley Leisure was created within a two year period from January 2003 to January 2005 during which time London was developing its bid to host the Olympic games in 2012.

The following essay was written in June 2005 immediately prior to the announcement of the winning Olympic bid. On Wednesday 6th July 2005, London was announced as the host city for the Olympic games in 2012.

Foreword by Camilla Brown (nee Jackson)

Robinson's latest body of work has been made over the past year in the Lower Lea Valley, which runs north-south from Stratford to canary wharf, three miles from central London. In recent months this area has become well known and it is currently in the media spotlight, as a central part of London's bid to host the Olympics in 2012. If successful it will site the Olympic stadium, velopark, aquatics centre, hockey centre along with the Olympic village. Located in London's East End and taking in parts of the Boroughs of Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Newham and Waltham Forest, this part of London is one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse, but also one of the most deprived. Unemployment is high, running at 35% on some estates and skills levels are low.

At first this location seems incongruous with Robinson's previous series Wonderland where he travelled internationally and photographed well known spaces such as Disney land in Paris; the Space Kennedy Centre, Florida; Las Vegas and Legoland UK. These are all places that are sold to us as where our dreams can come true- for the price of an entry ticket. They are landscapes that are artificial, usually commercial, or at times government designed and run enterprises. The viewer of the work confronts the contradiction between the image sold to us of such places and the reality of them, which is often far less glamorous or enticing. In this way Robinson in his work always concentrates on areas and places where people project their fantasies – these are sites of wish fulfilment and through his work we realise how these places cannot live up to the myths that surround them.

Likewise in this latest body of work Robinson focuses on a place that is currently being envisaged in the future as a utopian dream. The Olympics bid is currently surrounded with much anticipation and will be announced July 2005. It's potential regeneration is portrayed as a panacea for all the social ills that have historically faced the area. However this also presupposes that the land currently has no purpose and is not used, which is clearly far from the truth as is revealed in Robinson's works. In several of the landscape shots we also see the sublime and unexpected beauty of this derelict area where rural and urban coexist side by side. In one we see a pathway leading into, what appears to be, a wood and in another a tranquil scene taken on an Autumnal morning when light floods across a patch of water surrounded by trees. This could be the heart of the countryside, but small distant clues are given such as electricity pylons, industrial warehouses and tower blocks which suggest civilisation is not far away.

Elsewhere Robinson focuses on inbetween places, intersections in the derelict land, the sort of non places one would expect to walk by and remain unnoticed. He also photographs signs of how people have claimed, in various different ways parts of this landscape and made it their own. In one shot we see a mobile home alongside a caravan – with a man proudly watering his makeshift garden. We see the white table and chairs in an area marked out by a wooden fence. In other works people have marked out their territory in less desirable and attractive ways – yet taken ownership of it none the less, by daubing walls with graffiti. On one wall we see the words: “we are in a league of our own” and in another “stop the golf (sic) war”. It is this collision of worlds and people that seems to attract Robinson to this space.

In his portraits he reveals how well used this area is by many different members of the local community who enjoy their chosen leisure activities here. These range from golfers and cricketers to footballers and bowlers. We see a cross section of the community in age, race and creed participating. From the more traditional and typically elderly bowlers, who rather than play on a pristine outdoor green resort to a more practical indoor pitch. Cricketers shown in their formal whites and then the golfers, a sport so much more associated with middle class exclusive golf clubs, enjoyed here by a surprisingly diverse community.

However, as with the graffiti, some of the groups are less sociably desirable. In one photograph Robinson shows a group of teenagers hanging out in amongst the debris in a wasteland. Looking to their feet we see the discarded beer cans and fag ends of their leisure time, as they form a group beneath an electricity pylon. One of them wears a hooded top, an item of clothing that has of late become a symbol of disenfranchised youth. By just wearing ‘a hoodie’ a young person can be banned from social spaces such as shopping malls. However in this empathetic and edgy shot one wonders exactly where these teenagers will be able to go and hang out in the future should this type of space no longer exist.

The potential negative impact of the process of regeneration could be that it leads to a process of sanitisation that will mean precisely the people who currently use the space will be moved out. We live in an age of social exclusion when politicians and developers dreams lead to more people being left behind. One can only hope that if the bid is successful and the wonderland of the Olympic Dream is realised, that the community currently using the space will be able to remain.